

Signs of Hanoi Buildup Puzzle U.S. Command

By Peter Osnos

Washington Post Foreign Service

SAIGON, Feb. 16—U.S. military sources provided details today of the Communist buildup in the northern portion of South Vietnam and again said that the buildup indicates that the enemy is planning some major action soon.

"One of the biggest mysteries," said a source authorized to speak for the American command, "is why they are advertising this as much as they have. They are either very confident of success or in the end they are going to do nothing."

But he added that it was highly doubtful they "have done all this movement for nothing."

In recent months, according to U.S. intelligence reports, four North Vietnamese divisions have been moving south to positions in South Vietnam, above the Demilitarized Zone and just across the western border in Laos.

The present rate of infiltration, the command estimates, is twice that of last year. If it continues, in May the total Communist strength inside South Vietnam will approach the peak figure of 267,000 recorded in December, 1968.

The current buildup of manpower reverses a three-year downward trend. Sources said that Communist strength bottomed out last November at 195,000 and rose to 200,000 the next month.

Those figures include all North Vietnamese and South Vietnamese guerrillas in South Vietnam itself and in Laos and Cambodia.

In Washington, officials said there were several differing estimates of enemy strength in Vietnam, made by the Central Intelligence Agency, the Defense Department and the U.S. Command. Defense Department spokesman Jerry W. Friedheim said, "This is a very imprecise science. It gives you a rough handle, nothing more."

[Friedheim estimated some 95,000 North Vietnamese troops crossed the border into North in 1971.]

[An analysis of weekly Pentagon casualty summaries

showed that the department claimed nearly 98,000 enemy soldiers were killed in South Vietnam last year, the AP reported.]

The command's briefing came after nearly a week of the heaviest American bombing inside South Vietnam in 18 months and a step-up in attacks on infiltration routes in Laos, all designed to blunt the anticipated offensive.

Most of the air strikes have been concentrated in the Central Highlands provinces of Pleiku and Kontum and just below the Demilitarized Zone. The bombing stopped during a 24-hour cease-fire to mark the Tet lunar new year, yesterday, but has now resumed.

The U.S. military sources said the heavy air attacks would continue "for as long as we assess the threat to be as great as it is."

For weeks now, officials in Saigon and Washington have been talking about the enemy concentration and speculating that the attacks would come around Tet, or next week while President Nixon is in China.

Today, the sources at the U.S. command said, "Our intelligence people have never anticipated anything until the period after Tet . . . The date of Feb. 21 (when Mr. Nixon arrives in Peking) has cropped up many times in documents and prisoner interrogation."

But the sources added that the attacks could come at any time. They said documents seized within the past few days in Binh Dinh Province spoke of putting off the offensive until June or July.

Based on the intelligence supplied by the U.S. sources, the Communist troops seem to be massing in the same mountainous jungle areas of the north where the heaviest big-unit fighting has always been before, rather than near populated areas.

In the provinces around Saigon, the sources said, and in the Mekong Delta, the level of enemy activity and infiltration has remained roughly the same as it has been for the past year.

Much of the recent apprehension has been over the possibility that the coming at-

tacks might be similar in character to those of the country-wide Tet offensive in 1968, which involved assaults on provincial towns and major cities.

The command said the only plan they had turned up for an attack in Saigon was directed at aircraft and fuel storage tanks at Tansonghut airfield. The captured document carried no date for the assault.

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cost of \$19.8 million. The 418-foot vessel is scheduled for completion in 27 months.

Now if Congress will cooperate, the Wickersham's last two years in Alaska service should be good ones. The outlook is favorable that the waiver finally will be granted.

HELP YOUNG AMERICA WEEK

Mr. EAGLETON. Mr. President, in the State of Missouri, the first week of February was declared "Help Young America Week."

The purpose of this special week was to promote the strengthening of ties between business, youth, and parents. This goal is most commendable.

The sponsors of this project have contributed \$20,000 to each of the five most active nationwide youth organizations in America as a part of this program.

Through the fine work of the Boy Scouts of America, Girl Scouts of America, Girls and Boys Clubs of America as well as the Camp Fire Girls, the ideals of "Help Young America" will be reached. These organizations provide the guidance and leadership which helps contribute to the development of American youth.

Mr. Fred Bioren, of Kirkwood, Mo. is to be congratulated for his leadership in organizing support for these vigorous, outstanding organizations.

I wish to add my endorsement to the many others who are supporting the "Help Young America" campaign.

SCENARIOS FOR DISASTER: NOTES ON INDOCHINA 1972

Mr. GRAVEL. Mr. President, Gen. Douglas MacArthur once had a secret plan to end the war in Korea. His strategy—not revealed publicly until 1964—began with the use of 30 to 50 atomic bombs on key targets in China; 500,000 of Chiang Kai-shek's troops would then be unleashed for a mainland invasion. To interdict further Chinese support to North Korea, MacArthur favored sowing the entire border along the Yalu River with radioactive cobalt material—thus creating, so he thought, an impassable barrier that would last for 60 years.

Today, as America's military position in Southeast Asia deteriorates, one may justifiably fear that Richard Nixon's secret plan to end the war will take some cues from the late general. Recent events in Indochina suggest a major crisis will occur during this election year, possibly within the next 2 months. This conclusion is based on the following facts and analysis:

First. Although Nixon wishes to minimize the effect of the war on the United States because of its political harm to his reelection effort, he is still committed to eventual victory in Indochina. "Victory" means a non-Communist Southeast Asia plus an anti-Communist South Vietnam open to U.S. political control and U.S. capital penetration. Acceptable in the interim is a protracted war of low visibility to the American public, fought with U.S. technology but not troops, limited in scope so as to pose no threat to Chinese interests; a war which the United States cannot win but at least does not lose before the 1972 election.

Second. In various meetings with

American radicals, representatives of the PRG and the DRV have expressed their desire to see Nixon defeated in the 1972 election. Undoubtedly they know a major liability to Nixon would be a new NLF/NVA offensive throughout Indochina. A major attack, suggestive of the 1968 Tet offensive, would shatter the illusion that the North Vietnamese military strength has been crippled by the bombings, or that indigenous revolutionary cadres have been rooted out by pacification programs. Restraint on their part makes sense only if they have some reason for believing Nixon will actually withdraw after the 1972 election and halt all U.S. bombing and end de facto support for Thieu. No evidence suggests Nixon would do this. Wisely, the Vietnamese insurgents have never relied on the strength of the U.S. antiwar movement in planning and executing their struggle.

Third. The recent heavy air bombardment of North Vietnam underscores Nixon's determination to militarily protect the U.S. policy stated in No. 1 above—even if his actions are labelled "escalatory." Although the actions were serious, they should not have been unexpected; the week before the air strikes saw numerous warnings in the press by Government spokesmen that a major air strike against the North was in the making.

The exact reason for the strikes still remains unclear. The Nixon administration knows by now of its inability to substantially interdict supplies going south. After the raids ended, military sources told Washington Post writer Peter Jay that supplies destroyed were "fairly far back in the pipeline," to be used months from now—thus the raids, even assuming their strategic success, did not alleviate present U.S. concern over the central highlands. More likely Nixon used the raids as a warning, sharp but still limited, to the North Vietnamese that the United States would respond to an offensive with sustained bombing of the North. By limiting all Christmas sorties to below the 20th parallel—approximately 80 miles south of Hanoi—Nixon has evoked the memory of Johnson's change in bombing strategy in March, 1968—only Johnson deescalated the bombing by limiting it to below the 20th parallel. The irony seems more than coincidence, and reinforces the implied threat of the U.S. air attacks. In this way Nixon hopes to buy the calm needed for his success in Peking and in the U.S. presidential primaries.

A secondary reason for the raids might be that Nixon is using them as a provocation of the North Vietnamese. The December 26 raids followed a 2-month period in which 40 U.S. air strikes hit North Vietnam. These, coupled with the obnoxious behavior of U.S. representative to the Paris peace talks, William J. Porter, might be an attempt to goad the North Vietnamese into walking out of the talks. This would undercut the significance of the U.S. refusal to respond to the PRG seven-point peace plan; it would also give the United States freer military rein to attack North Vietnam with impunity, should it be seen as necessary.

Fourth. The national press has repeatedly in the past 2 months carried front-page stories quoting unnamed military, intelligence, and diplomatic sources who predict a major Communist offensive in the near future. For example, an AP dispatch of December 13 reports:

North Vietnam is preparing a major offensive into South Vietnam's Central Highlands, probably timed to embarrass President Nixon during his February visit to China, diplomatic sources said today.

These sources go on to predict a second major offensive after the major party conventions in the United States this summer. Similar warnings have been front-page news several times since then, with the January 2 Washington Post predicting more massive air strikes against the North in the near future.

Since the 1968 Tet offensive the United States has had an interest in leaking warnings of this kind around the first of the year; more than in the past, however, these Government briefings appear to be for the purpose of either defusing the potential political impact such an offensive would have at home or preparing the public for a major increase in U.S. war activity should Nixon think it necessary. All of the frantic speculation about the central highlands, however, may be a U.S. attempt to shift the American public's attention—and also perhaps the attention of the North Vietnamese—away from Laos and Cambodia, either of which could possibly fall to the insurgents this year.

Fifth. Thus, two events in Indochina could trigger a Nixon escalation. First, if the North Vietnamese and the NLF in fact decide to ignore Nixon's Christmas air-strike warning, a case can be made for a Communist offensive in late January or early February before the rainy season begins; to provoke China into canceling Nixon's invitation to Peking when the United States responds to the offensive; to influence the early primaries, particularly the New Hampshire primary where McCloskey is running a much stronger campaign than expected; and, to take advantage of recent military progress in Laos. If the insurgents are successful despite ARVN efforts and U.S. close air support—perhaps encouraging support actions in South Vietnamese cities—then Nixon will have difficulty in ignoring the attack. Second, if the insurgents win total control of Laos or Cambodia, Nixon will suffer the beginnings of defeat in Indochina, and the U.S. military situation will automatically worsen in South Vietnam. Nixon is convinced that evidence of U.S. military failure in Vietnam is as politically damaging to him as escalation—perhaps more so. He may try to play down an offensive's significance and publicly ignore it, but if forced to act he will move, as he stated in announcing his 1970 invasion of Cambodia, "decisively and not step by step." Such "decisive" action might be the bombing of Hanoi proper, the naval blockade or mining of Haiphong harbor, air raids on the North Vietnamese dike system. Behind these contingencies looms the specter which must be faced: the use of nuclear weapons, perhaps to interdict the Ho Chi Minh Trail and to demon-